

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

– A NEW FORCE IN PSYCHOLOGY?

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CONTENTS

	Page Number
1. INTRODUCTION	3
2.1 IMPORTANCE OF CULTURE AND SOCIAL PRACTICE	6
2.1.1 Development of the Individual	8
2.1.2 Mead	9
2.1.3 Vygotsky	10
2.2 LANGUAGE IS NOT NEUTRAL	11
2.2.1 Discourse Analysis	13
2.2.2 Discursive Psychology	15
2.2.3 Comparison with Traditional Attitude Research	16
2.3 QUALITATIVE METHODS	17
2.3.1 Unstructured Interviews	19
2.4 SOCIOLOGICAL SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY	20
2.4.1 Issue of Power in Relationships	20
2.4.2 Living in a Capitalist Society	20
3. EXAMPLES OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST EXPLANATIONS	22
3.1 THE SELF	22
3.1.1 Evidence	24
3.2 EMOTIONS	26
3.2.1 Support	27
3.3 RACISM	28
3.3.1 Race and Psychiatry	30
3.4 GENDER DEVELOPMENT	30
3.5 AGGRESSION	32
4. EVALUATION OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM	34
4.1 STRENGTHS	34
4.1.1 The individual is not separate from their society/culture	34
4.1.2 The methodology gives "rich" data	34
4.1.3 Combatting sociobiology	34
4.1.4 Individuals are not passive in their development	35
4.2 WEAKNESSES	35
4.2.1 Methods are "not scientific"	35
4.2.2 Overemphasis on culture	36
4.2.3 Discursive psychology	36
4.2.4 Relativism	36
GLOSSARY	38
FURTHER READING	39
REFERENCES	39

1. INTRODUCTION

Psychology is a discipline which is open to change. It is not fixed to certain principles. Ideas do come and go in terms of their prominence in the subject. Freudian concepts, followed by Behaviourism, Cognitive, and Humanistic concepts have all been at the forefront during the twentieth century.

In recent years, a number of authors (eg: Elms 1975) have suggested that psychology is in "crisis".

The "crisis" as such revolves around the problems being voiced about the dominant laboratory-experimental approach in psychology, and particularly in social psychology.

New approaches came to focus on the accounts that people gave of their actions (ie: the meaning they attached to them). What could be called the "insider's view". The belief that the researcher had privileged access to the "real behaviour" was questioned, and eventually also, the neutrality of research. The researcher used the same social processes (and biases) to interpret the research data as individuals in everyday life. The most important aspect of this process was language.

The "crisis", which appeared more in social psychology, revolved around two key issues (Hogg and Vaughan 1995).

i) Psychology was predominantly reductionist - ie: complex behaviour explained by simplistic explanations. For example, social behaviour explained in terms of individual psychology.

ii) Psychology was predominantly positivistic - the experimental/scientific method was the dominant research method.

Within the history of scientific psychology, the traditional scientific method has become an issue; particularly the claim of neutral value-free science. For example, it has been noted that the assumptions within this value-free scientific psychology carried racist values, and belittled non-Western cultures. The truth is that "accounts of the world are inseparable from broader social practices" (Gergen 1994 p427).

From the desire to look in new areas (ie away from the main traditions of the lab-experimental approach) has come social constructionism.

This perspective could be classed as on the nurture side of the tradition nature versus nurture debate (if this debate still exists); placing great emphasis on

learning (but in a different way to Behaviourists).

Gergen (1994) shows that in its short history social constructionism has concentrated on three lines of inquiry.

i) The construction of reality through language and discourse.

ii) The processes by which individuals come to understand the world.

iii) The development of accounts of human action based within a relational and social context.

Social constructionism can be seen as the movement from the search for "'psychological truth' to the social processes in which such truths are embedded and the relational functions that they serve" (Gergen 1994 p429).

"It argues that persons can only be properly understood in terms of their social practices and ways of thinking and being which constitute their particular society" (Stevens 1996 p30). Even the most intimate aspects of behaviour (eg: self perception) are a result of social upbringing more than biology. The most important aspect of growing up is social development.

Social constructionism, though, is not really based on a fixed set of principles - it is "more properly considered as a continuously unfolding conversation in which various positions may be occupied, elaborated, or vacated as the dialogue proceeds" (Gergen 1994 p427).

Burr (1995) emphasises the "critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge" (p3), and the cultural and historical specificity of knowledge.

The main principles can be summarised as:

a) The crucial importance of culture and social practices in the understanding of behaviour; even in the way that we see ourselves.

b) The transmission of culture and social practices through language, which is not neutral but value laden. Thus the need to focus on language used in interactions (for example through discourse analysis).

c) The research methodology chosen is thus different from the experiment in the main; because the experimental situation is itself a social construction not a vacuum. It is better to accept the bias inherent in research and listen to the participants themselves. So we see the use of what is classed as "qualitative" methods of research.

d) Studying the individual cannot take place outside their social environment, even for behaviours like memory, which may appear to be within the individual, and relatively independent of society. This approach has become known as "Sociological Social Psychology" (SSP) (Still 1996). It also makes reference to what some would see as sociological issues (eg: power in society).

Furthermore, any attempt to understand knowledge outside the cultural/social context is not possible - "there are only situated knowledges" (Stevens and Wetherell 1996).

The social constructionist approach has implications for our understanding of reality. Reality is socially constructed, not pre-existent, and it is also multiple. There is no single "truth". This is relativism. "Relativists, in general, are happy to live with the idea that their own claims to knowledge are constructed" (Wetherell and Still 1996 p112).

Social constructionism is different to other approaches because it is anti-essentialist. This means that it is against any "pre-given" content of the person (Burr 1995). So, for example, there is no such thing as personality existing within the person. Any observations of personality traits are constructed from the social interaction that gives rise to that observation.

Let me take each of the main points in more detail, and explain how these principles vary from other tradition approaches. Here I am talking about the approaches that have dominated psychology for most of this century - Behaviourism, Psychodynamics, and the Biological approaches.

2.1 IMPORTANCE OF CULTURE AND SOCIAL PRACTICE

For the social constructionist approach, behaviour is shaped and reshaped from interactions with others, and by cultural and social practices. Thus the majority of behaviours are "constructed" by the meaning place on them in the social context of a particular time and place. Behaviours do not simply exist because we perform them; they exist because they have been created in the social context.

"The person, consciousness, mind and the self are seen as social through and through" (Wetherell and Maybin 1996 p222).

For Bruner (1990) it is culture, not biology, that places constraints upon, and shapes our behaviour.

When we enter human life, it is as if we walk on stage into a play whose enactment is already in progress - a play whose somewhat open plot determines what parts we may play and toward what denouements we may be heading. Others on stage already have a sense of what the play is about, enough of a sense to make negotiation with a newcomer possible (p34).

Bruner also talks about "folk psychology" - the idea that every culture has its own beliefs about what is normal - "how human beings 'tick', what our own and other minds are like, what one can expect situated actions to be like, what are possible modes of life, how one commits oneself to them, and so on" (Bruner 1990 p35).

However, biology may play a part in that Bruner believes this is a predisposition to organise experiences into a linear and structured form (known as a "narrative").

Great emphasis is placed upon "narrative" in the process of social constructionism. It is the way we describe our behaviour and the events around us, to ourselves and to others. This process is not neutral, and "narrative" has a particular aim. For example, to maintain our sense of consistency over time.

As children are growing, "narratives" are used to explore the self, and others within a cultural context. On top of this process, individuals collaborate in their "narratives", and "negotiate" the meaning of a situation.

"Narratives" develop through the processes of

"framing" and "affect regulation". The former shows how the experience is divided up and stored in the memory. An early example of this process could be Bartlett's "War of the Ghost" research. A story which was unusual to the American participants was later recalled as if a typical American story.

But this process is not individual; it involves storing the information in memory based on the sharing of memory within a culture (Shotter 1990).

The second process of "affect regulation" is based on the premise that memories are linked to "affects" (attitudes). It is this "affect" that is the basis of recalling a memory. But more than that: - "The recall is then a construction made largely on the basis of this attitude, and its general effect is that of a justification of the attitude" (Bartlett 1932 quoted in Bruner 1990 p58). Thus the process of simply storing a memory is not objective, but influenced by culture.

Take, for example, a study by Harris, Sardarpour-Bascom and Meyer (1989). Three short stories were compiled about planning a date ("Evening Out"), lunch hour ("Work Day"), and the first day at university ("School Day"). Two versions of each story were produced; identical except for a few details consistent with the culture of the USA or Mexico. For example, in the Mexican version of "Evening Out", the girl had a chaperone. The participants were undergraduates from the USA who read one of the two versions of the stories. Their recall was tested 30 minutes, and then two days later.

Recall after two days tended to see the Mexican version like the American version. The authors concluded that "the appropriate cultural schemas were clearly operating here, most likely in the sense of directing retrieval processes" (Harris et al 1989 p95).

Human beings are born into relatively similar environmental pressures (to find food; to rear children), and exist in similar bodies. Thus similar themes will develop and similar psychologies. But there will be difference.

The social constructionist approach takes into account the life history of the individual (the "narratives" of that individual), and social history ("the cumulative effects of group processes, institutions, social structures and social divisions over time" - Wetherell 1996 p300).

The most obviously quoted example is of a person's position in the class system of their society. However, it is too simple to suggest that individuals are

determined by this. The position in the class system is abstract; this becomes real to the individual through the experiences that derive from that position. For example, an individual in poverty will experience hardship, and this is the experience that is real in the "narratives" of the individual. "As people live their lives they are continually making themselves as characters or personalities through the ways in which they reconcile and work with the raw materials of their social situation" (Wetherell 1996 p305).

Connell (1987) sees the formation of the individual's social identity as "projects"; ie: information is collected from many sources over time, with the ultimate aim of a unified "narrative". Thus it is possible that there may be contradictions because individuals are both active and passive in this construction process.

This whole process needs to be seen in the context of power relations in society (eg: between men and women). The preoccupation with body shape among many women in the West can be seen as partly due to power in society. Generally society is male dominated, which allows them the power to set the agenda of, for example, what is beautiful. Through media and everyday images this becomes part of the female identity. The process may well be more complex than this, and there is much written about its importance in understanding social behaviour (see for example Orbach 1993).

Wetherell (1996) summarises the place of power as "enacted through everyday relationships" and "dependent on the positions others take up".

2.1.1 DEVELOPMENT OF THE INDIVIDUAL

If most behaviour of the individual now is constructed, then they must have arrived at this point somehow. It is important to note that during child development, the individual is active in the construction process. This is distinct from Behaviourism where the individual is passive, and is simply a product of stimulus-response (SR).

Individuals are born with different temperaments, and mental capacities, but these differences are then worked upon by social practices, and meaning is then placed upon them.

Much of the traditional work on socialisation processes tends to see behaviour that is learnt as being imposed on the child from the outside; ie: "how the 'outside' - cultural beliefs, values and so - is brought

to the 'inside' - the child's inner cognitive, emotional and imaginative development" (Wetherell and Maybin 1996 pp247-8). Again to emphasise that within social constructionism, the process is active through language. As developed in section 2.2, we will see that language is not neutral but dynamic and fluid. An important term used is "negotiation" to emphasise the interactive nature of development.

Two key developmental psychologists are linked into these ideas - George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) and Lev Vygotsky (1902-1936)

2.1.2 MEAD

Mead believed that the self is not a structure, but a process (not organised but reflexive), which acts and responds to itself. Thus it is possible that there are many selves, some more important than others. The person is not just a mere responder to internal/external influences, but acts towards their world, interprets what happens, and organises actions on the basis of it. Knowledge of the self and others develops simultaneously, both dependent on social interaction.

The direction of development for Mead is from social to individual, through language. Crucial to this process is interaction with others, which help the child take on the perspectives of others. This, for Mead, is the process of the development of the self. This takes three stages:

- i) "Preparatory stage" - initially the child's motivation revolves around basic biological drives, but soon they learn to respond to others (eg: crying brings attention).
- ii) "Play stage" - the child learns to try out other perspectives by the use of role-playing.
- iii) "Game stage" - children are now able to organise multiple simultaneous roles in relation to their self. This ability when finalised becomes the "generalised other" (the combined attitudes of a whole social group).

Thus thought can be seen as a dialogue between the spontaneous "I" and the "me" (based on the "generalised other"). This process though is dynamic, and continues in different contexts.

2.1.3 VYGOTSKY

Vygotsky also believed that the direction of development is from social to individual, but with greater emphasis on language than Mead.

Vygotsky believed that the "individual response emerges from the forms of collective life" (1981b quoted in Wertsch 1985 p59). Furthermore, he says:

Any function in the child's cultural development appears twice, or on two planes. First it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane. First it appears between people as an interpsychological category, and then within the child as an intrapsychological category (quoted in Wertsch pp60-1).

This process is known as internalisation. But the process is more than just the child reproducing a copy of external behaviour internally; by the process of internalisation, the child's internal structures are transformed. There is not a consciousness waiting for the arrival of external information, but "consciousness is a product of society" (Leont'ev 1981 quoted in Wertsch 1985 p63).

Wertsch (1985) quotes Vygotsky's example of the development of pointing in young children. Initially the young child is grasping unsuccessfully for an object; the adult responds to this movement by placing meaning upon it as pointing. The grasping becomes transformed into pointing firstly for others, and then lastly it becomes meaningful to the child.

We can summarise the main points of the process of internalisation (based on Wertsch 1985) as:

- i) It is not merely copying of the external reality into the internal, but is the formation of internal reality.
- ii) It is the external reality that matters is social interaction.

Egocentric speech is not a primitive form of speech that disappears as the child becomes social, but is a critical step in the tradition from purely social speech (beginning at birth) to inner speech and thought.

Children come to internalise dialogues which they see in the society around; but the language they use carries with it the social and cultural trappings of the context. This dialogue is at the social level first, then becomes internalised as part of the individual cognitive processes.

It has been suggested that this social construction of the child's cognitive development allows for the idea that the "mind" extends beyond the individual. For example, children working together to solve a problem that an individual could not.

2.2 LANGUAGE IS NOT NEUTRAL

One way to see language is as a neutral communication code where A passes information to B and vice versa. Within social constructionism is the idea of discursive psychology, and the study of discourse.

Defining "discourse" can be difficult. Parker (1992) defines it as a "system of statements which construct an object" (p5). Iniguez (1997) prefers "a set of statements the production conditions of which can be defined" (p149). But it can mean a number of things to different writers - for some, it is all forms of talk and writing; others see it as the "historically developing, linguistic practices" (Potter and Wetherell 1987 pp6-7). Generally though, we will see it as all spoken interaction and written texts.

Language is seen as a social process itself, rather than just a means of communication. For example, the words chosen are not neutral but tell us something about the social world.

Wetherell and Maybin (1996) give three features of language use which challenge the assumption that language is neutral:

i) Language has an "action orientation" - utterances state information, and perform an action. In an argument, individuals are not just stating opposite facts, but are using language to justify their position and undermine the other's. We are doing something with our utterances.

ii) Language is part of the social world - rather than language simply telling us about the social world; it is a "constitutive part of those actions, events and situations" (Wetherell and Maybin 1996 p244). If you are describing the behaviour of a mutual friend to another, the words used influence the whole reaction of the listener. So, if you use negative terms to describe the behaviour, the listener, who likes this mutual friend a lot, may become unhappy with the speaker.

iii) Indexical property of discourse - all language is defined by the context of its use. Thus to say "it is large" in two different situations, though the same sentence, means two totally different things based on the context of talking about a fish or standing at the bottom

of a mountain.

The whole emphasis is away from language as referring to objects "out there" to the idea that language is about building the social reality. The same event can be described in a number of different ways. It is always possible to see how the choice of words can influence the whole understanding of an event. For example, during a news report, the use of words like "murdered", "killed", "slaughtered" - all set the context for understanding the perpetrators as good or bad. Potter and Wetherell (1987) use the example of "terrorist" or "freedom fighter". Taken a step further, with our language we are also defining ourselves.

Interactions involving language are negotiations where the participants are using their language carefully to establish the meaning of the situation (for example, to show that they are blameless in an argument), and consequently to set the meaning of themselves. Wetherell and Maybin (1996) call this the "double property of talk".

Furthermore, learning to use language is more than just learning the grammar. It involves becoming a "competent speaker"; ie: how to speak in different contexts - whether to tell rude jokes or not in the presence of your parents.

A good example of the learning of this process can be seen with the Kaluli (Papua New Guinea). Here the mother holds the baby facing outwards, and speaks for the baby (ie: modelling the appropriate responses) (Ochs and Schieffelin 1984).

A very important aspect of language as constructing the individual is the concept of "identity positions" (Harre and Van Langenhove 1991). These are similar to social roles, but more dynamic and changing. When an individual is involved in interaction, there are possible locations ("positions") that are being taken - first order, second order, and third order.

- EG (1) A says "get my tea"
 B replies "no, I'm not your servant"
 (2) Later B tells C "A is always demanding things"

What is important is not just what is said, but the implicit meanings involved.

(1) A's statement is first order positioning; they are establishing the social situation; ie: that they believe they have the right to demand their tea. There is an

implicit power inequality within the interaction. But B's response is questioning this right; ie: B is attempting to position A as a person without that right to demand (second order positioning).

(2) B's telling of the event to another is third order positioning; ie: A is repositioned as demanding and thoughtless.

During life, particularly within the family situations, many positions are repeated, and individuals come to "invest" in certain positions (Holloway 1984).

2.2.1 DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Discourses fulfill a number of functions:

i) At an interpersonal level, they are used to explain and attribute causes of behaviour.

ii) They have a "political" function of setting out norms and standards against which behaviour is judged. Petkova (1995) uses the example of labelling many women as witches in the Middle Ages as justification for continuing exploitation of them.

iii) Discourses maintain differences between categories of people by making the similarities between these categories invisible and the differences visible. Petkova (1995) argues that today PMS is used, instead of witchcraft, to explain "unusual" (eg: aggressive) behaviour of women, while still reaffirming the stereotype of them as "feminine" (not aggressive).

The aim of discourse analysis is to study the entire discourse - "what is said, in what way, by whom and for what purpose" (Hogg and Vaughan 1995 p509). So, for example, it is possible to see the sexism embedded in what appears on the surface to be a non-sexist discourse.

Wetherell and Potter (1992) believe that discourse analysis focuses on the "activities of justification, rationalization, categorization, attribution, making sense, naming, blaming and identifying" which are "quintessential psychological activities" (p2) ¹.

Potter and Wetherell (1987) have shown that the way individuals construct their arguments can be used to show the underlying social assumptions. This is the focus on rhetoric.

¹ See Banister et al (1994) for an example of piece of discourse analysis.

Discourse analysis has been used in other disciplines before its arrival in psychology, and is a development on the technique of content analysis. It is based on the "description of the recurrently used words, phrases and linguistic devices which categorise and reproduce the social world" (Parker 1992 p83).

Potter and Wetherell (1995) highlight six central themes with the use of discourse analysis.

i) Practices and resources - the aim is to look at "what people do with their talk and writing" (p81) (known as discourse practices), and the resources used to achieve this aim (the categories and interpretative repertoires used).

ii) Construction and description - this is the study of "how people assemble (versions of) the world in the course of their interactions" (p81).

iii) Content - this is the focus on what is said.

iv) Rhetoric - within discourse are inbuilt "argumentative organisations"; ie: what is said is in reference to an imaginary counter-argument.

v) Stake and accountability - within discourse analysis, people are treated as having an interest (stake) in their actions. In practice, there are no "objective" statements.

vi) Cognition in action - it is more important to study what is actually said rather than what may be individual's cognitive attitudes.

Potter and Wetherell (1995) analysed interviews with white New Zealanders about their views of the Maoris. Two main views of "Maori culture" were highlighted. They are what the authors call "culture-as-heritage" and "culture-as-therapy". The first type sees the "Maori culture" as "something to be preserved and treasured" (p89). Thus the aim is to "freeze" the group in the past, and invalidate the contemporary situation.

The second type sees "Maori culture" as a psychological need. For example, Maoris have created their own problems by not being "fully rooted" in their culture. Both views are used to disempower the Maoris. The highlighting of such processes is an important part of discourse analysis.

Parker (1989) highlights that discourse analysis is different to other techniques used before in psychology in three ways:

i) Reflexivity - the technique encourages the researcher to be self searching about the conclusions, and to accept the "constructed" nature of these conclusions.

ii) Relativism - for the social constructionist all knowledge is "constructed". There are no fixed "truths" to find out. This is a definite challenge to the belief of "science" that it is neutral, and concerned only with establishing universal truths.

iii) Crisis - the boundaries between psychology, or particularly social psychology, are further blurred. The "crisis" of what is social psychology as a separate discipline reoccurs.

Overall, this approach of discursive psychology sees language as "reality", and thus that is the focus of study.

Banister et al (1994) quote Parker and Burman (1993) who detail thirty-two problems with discourse analysis. The most important being that language (ie: discourse) is treated as the most powerful constraint on behaviour, and this constraint can be simply analysed by a researcher. "There is more variability in human action and expression than that expressed in language; as researchers we construct our own image of the world when we reconstruct 'discourses'; and we have some responsibility for how our analysis will function" (Banister et al 1994 p106).

2.2.2 DISCURSIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Discursive psychology has developed as an alternative to traditional attitude research, and to the more recent social representations theory. The focus is on "actions and resources" (Potter 1996).

The main areas of study are twofold:

- i) "Activities" - what people do with their talk; the dynamic process of interaction.
- ii) "Resources" - eg: vocabulary, categorisations.

Discursive psychology is based on three principles (Potter 1996):

- a) Construction - the individual's version of the world is constructed through practical interactions as if it is independent of the individual.
- b) Action - speaking is seen as action, and this is what is studied, not thought.

c) Rhetoric - talk is "used" to make a point, to counter a real or imagined argument. Whatever is said always has the alternative in mind.

However, if what people say is too obviously countering another view, and is seen as an attempt to influence, it will be discounted as a "stake". An individual holds a particular attitude because it is to their interest. For example, company managers believe that unions hinder progress. The reaction is very much - "they would say that, wouldn't they?"

This is obviously important in advertising. If individuals are to be persuaded to buy certain products, they must not immediately switch off because of "stake". One way around this problem is "stake inoculation". This is a technique to "prevent a claim being undermined as a product of stake" (Potter 1996 p165).

For example, a celebrity endorsing a product is portrayed as initially sceptical about the product's claims, and then is won over. The point of the initial scepticism is to counter the argument - "you would say that you're being paid to say so" of the celebrity.

2.2.3 COMPARISON WITH TRADITIONAL ATTITUDE RESEARCH

The difference between discursive psychology and traditional attitude research can be seen, firstly, in the methods used. The traditional attitude questionnaire has been dismissed as artificial and limiting, and replaced by discourse analysis of conversations, articles, and TV programmes. The whole emphasis is on "naturalistic materials" ².

Another difference revolves around what is an attitude. Traditionally seen as a cognitive entity - the emphasis being on what is contained within the mind. Discursive psychology focuses on attitudes as a feature of interaction. There is no difference between holding the attitude in your head, and then performing the behaviour which could be in line with the attitude. Performing the action, or what is said, is the attitude.

Traditional research on attitudes has used single words or short phrases to represent the attitude object. But this is simplistic, and can change the attitude response depending on the words chosen. Attitudes are not "individual evaluative responses towards a given stimulus object. Instead, attitudes are stances taken in matters of controversy: they are positions in arguments" (Billig 1991 quoted in Potter 1996 pp160-1).

² See Potter and Wetherell (1987) for an example in research on racism.

2.3 QUALITATIVE METHODS

Even the methods used by social constructionists are different to the traditional in psychology. Social constructionism is particularly critical of the traditional "objective" methods of scientific psychology. The idea that all knowledge about human behaviour has been collected in a precise, "untainted" (by human bias) way.

Gergen (1985) details the assumptions of social constructionism, which highlight the antithesis to scientific psychology.

(a) What we take to be knowledge is not a product of hypothesis-testing.

(b) The terms of understanding the world are social artefacts; ie: products of "historically situated interchanges among people" (p267).

(c) A particular explanation prevails because of the social process not "empirical validity" (p268).

Social constructionists are challenging the dominance of the experiment - and in particular two issues - (i) the universality of human behaviour and thus the generalizability of experiments, and (ii) the neutrality of the method used.

Gergen (1994) highlights the main challenge from the social construction movement towards traditional methodology:

a) Practical Empiricism - research claiming theories that predict behaviour in the future are of limited objectivity. Rather methods should be used to assess current conditions, and "to draw trend lines for deliberating the future" (p428).

b) Conceptual Innovation - a shift from the isolation of the lab to study "real situations", and to understand the role of language within that situation. But more than that, psychology should benefit society (rather than just "scholarly inquiry").

c) Valuative Reflection - research should have a "moral" element in that it is concerned with what "ought to be" in society rather than simply describing "what is". "By elucidating common assumptions, investigators hope people may be emancipated from the taken for granted" (p428).

The aim of qualitative research is too produce a lot

of data about a limited number of individuals as opposed to quantitative research which aims to produce a large amount of data from a large number of individuals. Rather than reducing individuals to simple figures, qualitative research will attempt to find out more about the individual's behaviour through, for example, in-depth interviews. Banister et al (1994) believe the qualitative researcher will be "focusing on the context and integrity of the material" (p1).

They further define the method as "the interpretative study of a specified issue or problem in which the researcher is central to the sense that is made" (Banister et al 1994 p2).

The traditional method has attempted to remove the experimenter from the research, to place the individual in an "experimental vacuum", and claim objective discoveries. Qualitative researchers accept that the research exists in a context, and involves an interaction between researcher and subject. The researcher will also be making interpretations. There is no claim at objectivity.

Any piece of research is faced by three "methodological horrors" according to Woolgar (1988):

i) Indexicality - any explanation of behaviour is tied to a specific occasion. In other words, generalization is very difficult. Qualitative research is interested in the findings in that specific situation for their own value.

ii) Inconcludability - research data will change as less control over the extraneous variables occur. This has encouraged attempts at an "experimental vacuum" - the attempted isolation of everything except the specific behaviour of the participant being studied. Qualitative researchers accept that this isolation is not possible. For example, the language used to give instructions in an experiment is important - whether it is demanding or requesting can influence the participant's behaviour.

iii) Reflexivity - the researcher studies themselves as they make the interpretation of the data - subjectivity is encouraged. Traditional research has claimed to be objective, and thus either the researcher does not make interpretations, or their interpretations are seen as objective observations. "Research is always carried out from a particular standpoint, and the pretence to neutrality in many quantitative studies in psychology is disingenuous" (Banister et al 1994 p13).

Furthermore, added to all these "methodological horrors" is the simple fact that studying an individual

changes or affects them. There is no pure, untainted "real" behaviour to get at.

2.3.1 UNSTRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

A number of methods could be classed as qualitative - unstructured observations, ethnography, discourse analysis (see section 2.2.1), action research, and feminist research ³. The most important is the unstructured open interview.

This method allows the investigation of issues too complex for quantitative methods. And particularly, in this use of the interview, what the interviewee says is valued. The result "is viewed as a collaborative enterprise which not only involves full participation of the interviewees but also incurs responsibility on the part of the researcher to be accountable to, and in some cases to conduct research agendas according to the demands of, the participants" (Banister et al 1994 p52-3).

This is sometimes called "new paradigm" research (Reason and Rowan 1981) ⁴. Rather than the interviewee merely being a means to an end, the whole "research encounter" is assessed with the attempt not to exploit the participants.

Thus it is important that the researcher is open about the whole event. Something which was discouraged in the past because of the fear of "demand characteristics" and "subject biases".

This openness includes full transcripts, and honesty about interpretation of what is said ⁵.

³ All these methods are reviewed in Banister et al (1994).

⁴ See Coolican (1990) for an outline of objections to the "traditional paradigm".

⁵ See Banister et al (1994) for a detailed example of how this method is used.

2.4 SOCIOLOGICAL SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Sociological social psychology takes the social level, and uses that as the basis for explaining individual behaviour.

2.4.1 ISSUE OF POWER IN RELATIONSHIPS

One issue which traditional psychologists have ignored is that of power. Within society, not all individuals are equal, and possess the same power. In certain social contexts, the situation is shaped by powerful discourses; this is the way language used "orders and evaluates knowledge and experience in relation to deeply held beliefs and values" (Wetherell and Maybin 1996 p262).

Furthermore, within the discourses individuals are "positioned" in different ways (ie: the role that they are given or take in a particular social context). For example, the use of "client" rather than "patient" within the mental health system establishes different discourses on the relationship between "therapist" or "doctor".

The issue of power comes to the forefront when trying to understand gender development, and the power structures within modern society (which includes "patriarchy"). How men and women come to understand their masculinity and femininity must be seen in the context that some groups and individuals within society have more power (control) than others.

Connell (1995) argues that "men gain a dividend from patriarchy in terms of honour, prestige and the right to command" (quoted in Wetherell 1996 p333). This simple observation at a macro-level can be seen in the individual psychology at the micro-level in, for example, the observation that men tend to dominate conversations more than women, and in the differing interaction and non-verbal behaviours.

2.4.2 LIVING IN A CAPITALIST SOCIETY

Much psychological research has accepted that society (environment) influences the development of the self/personality, but specifically social constructionism emphasises the economic organisation of society (ie: capitalism in the West). This can be particularly applied to the development of the male identity.

For example, traditional male characteristics of

competitiveness and aggressiveness can be seen as a direct product of such an economic system.

Furthermore, it is possible to see different types of male identity rooted in different experiences of work - the traditional distinction between the factory floor and the management offices, for example.

Researchers like Tolson (1977) and Seidler (1991) have shown how the simple difference between where one works within the company hierarchy can be crucial in understanding the male identity, and their whole lives and relationships. So, for example, the subordination that the traditional factory floor ("working-class") male feels can lead to compensation of "an exaggerated masculine culture.. and the desire to dominate and gain recognition at home" (Wetherell 1996 p329).

Taking this argument further, the changes in the workforce and working patterns (what has been called the "feminization of the workforce") will have an effect on the gender identity of individuals. This has led some writers to talk about "masculinity in crisis", while others see it as "modernizing" ⁶.

This process can also effect minority groups, and their identity. Clatterbaugh (1990) says that for black males "the message from capitalism is 'no chance'" (quoted in Wetherell 1996 p331) leading to the development of identities based on other activities than work (for example, being "streetwise"; Westwood 1990).

⁶ Eg: Carrigan et al (1985) on the "new man".

3. Examples of Social Constructionist Explanations of Behaviours

3.1 THE SELF

The common assumptions of the self are as follows (according to Wetherell and Maybin 1996):

- i) Self contained mind - an individual has a self-contained mind, which makes them unique and separate to others.
- ii) Consistent personality - each person has one personality seen in a consistent set of traits that makes up their "true" nature.
- iii) Private thoughts - individuals own their private and organized thoughts and feelings; though these may be expressed publicly.
- iv) "Realising" individual - individuals are the centre of their experience, and try to "realise" themselves (ie: realise their plans, beliefs, attitudes) through their actions.

Taking these four assumptions together, it is suggested that the individual is self-contained, consistent, independent, unitary and private. Any effect of society is passing and relatively unimportant.

The social constructionist approach challenges each of these four assumptions in the way that it sees the self as existing:

- i) Self contained mind - because we are self contained in terms of our bodies, (ie: we are physically separate from others), it is assumed that we are isolated from society. But the way we see ourselves is a product of society. The mind, as we know it to ourselves, is better seen as "a line momentarily and arbitrarily drawn around pieces of the public world" (Wetherell and Maybin 1996 p222).

So for example, we look at ourselves and our personal ambitions as private to ourselves, but these ambitions are a mirror of the ambitions created in society. To see personal development as a linear progression is a product of capitalist society/Western thinking.

- ii) Consistent personality - attempts have been made

to establish the consistency of personality across time and situations. For example, Epstein (1979) using 25 measures of extraversion found a correlation of +.83. We feel ourselves that we are consistent - we remember past behaviours which appear similar to our behaviours now. But for the social constructionist approach, the self is "distributed" (ie: it exists in more than one solitary place). Bruner sees it as "the sum and swarm of participations in social life" (quoted in Wetherell and Maybin 1996 p223).

So for example, rather than the same self being both a teacher and sports club member; they are different selves based on the social practices of the situations that have helped to construct these selves. Thus we are talking about "selves"; that is not to say that we do not carry certain consistencies with us based on our temperament. But most of all there is not a "true self" out there to be found. The self is always located in the situation in which the individual is existing. Identity is multi-faceted, but based on key relational settings. It is the relations within the situations that create the self.

However this approach does allow for the contradictions and conflicts that exist in people's personalities. For example, we can apply this idea to the problem of inconsistency between attitudes and behaviour.

It has been a problem for researchers as to why individuals who hold certain attitudes will then perform what appears to be contradictory behaviour. The assumption always being that the individual is consistent. If the individual is not fixed and/or consistent then it is possible that they will perform different behaviours depending on the situation, but still believe that they hold the same attitudes. Or alternatively, following the line of discursive psychology, the attitudes as expressed in that particular situation is what matters as that attitude is an action.

iii) Private thoughts - It would seem obvious that we have our own private thoughts which we can express if we want with language in the public domain. But even this private part is influenced by the society around us.

A good example comes from the experiences of Dorinne Kondo (1990) in Japan. She was born in the USA but is of Japanese-American origin. She went to study in Japan for a period of time, and lived among local families. Because of her appearance as Japanese in everyday life, she was treated as Japanese. She tells how after a period of

time, she started to "lose" herself. So powerful were the social forces that came into her private thoughts and influenced her self perception (as well as her own behaviour). Kondo reports the realisation that she had changed, that she had become immersed in the new culture.

As I glanced into the shiny metal surface of the butcher's display case, I noticed someone who looked terribly familiar: a typical young housewife, clad in slip-on scandals and the loose, cotton shift called 'home wear'...a woman walking with a characteristically Japanese bend to the knees and a sliding of the feet. Suddenly I clutched the handle of the stroller to steady myself as a wave of dizziness washed over me, for I realised I had caught a glimpse of nothing less than my own reflection (Kondo 1990 p20).

This is a slightly different example because most people do not experience such a change, but it does highlight the way social practices become part of our private selves.

iv) "Realising" individuals - Individuals may have plans, but these exist within a social framework (ie: one cannot socialised oneself). The process of "realising" is a conspiracy or collaboration. Shotter(1993) talks about "joint action" which simultaneously positions all actions and individuals. So one individual's plans cannot exist separate to others, and in interacting with those others, it helps realise the individual. It is not possible to define oneself alone because it includes other's definitions within the same situation. Thus individual realisations exist within the constraints of situations.

However to talk about "joint action" in the situation does not mean that all individuals are equal in that situation; this is where, for example the issue of power is important. The self is mainly constructed by language, "talk", and discourse.

It seems that following the arguments here, the individual is "made up" of many selves, and does not really have any "core self". That is not completely true. Mauss (1985) proposed the distinction between "Moi" and "Personne". The former is a universal sense of being conscious, which is based on biology. While "Personne" is that part of the self which is "culturally specific".

3.1.1 EVIDENCE

Social constructionists make use of cross-cultural

studies because the comparison between cultures will show that behaviour is a product of a particular culture.

(i) Markus and Kitayama (1991) compared the self in the USA and Japan. A common technique for studying self-perception is the "Who Am I?" series of questions. Individuals are asked that question, usually twenty times. Answers from the USA tend to be different from the Japanese in the use of generalised statements (eg: "I am optimistic"; "I am happy-go-lucky"), which describe the person as consistently these characteristics. While the Japanese answers are different in the description of what they do (eg: "I play football on Saturdays"; "I watch baseball at the weekend").

These answers show the differences between the cultures: in the USA, the focus is on the individual and independence; while Japan is a culture based on relationships and collectiveness.

(ii) Harre and Gillett (1994) refer to the difference in language used for the self, and how this influences the self-perception. For example, in English, the main personal pronoun is "I", which suggests a fixed unchanging individual. Whereas for Japanese, Harre and Gillett report, the pronoun changes depending on the social relations of the persons talking. This is also true for the verbs used. For example, "motsu" means "to carry"/"to hold" when talking to friends, but "omochi shimasu" would be used with superiors (Kondo 1990 quoted in Wetherell and Maybin 1996).

(iii) Lienhardt (1985) studying the Dinka people in Sudan shows how the English distinction of mental and physical states is not universal. In English, the distinction is made between "body" and "soul", between "heart" and "mind". For the Dinka, there is no difference, the word used can mean different things in different contexts. For example, the word for "heart" ("pwou") can mean "chest", "mind" or "intention" (Wetherell and Maybin 1996). The consequent difference, according to Lienhardt, is that the Dinka have a less differentiated conception of the person, compared to the English.

But there could be a problem with the use of cross-cultural studies. If behaviour is relatively "culture-bound", then it will be difficult to understand another culture without misinterpretation.

3.2 EMOTIONS

Much of the research in this area has been concerned with the universal features of emotions, and consequently their biological origins.

Here, once more, the social constructionist approach challenges the tradition. In the work by Schachter and Singer (1962) the physiological aspect of emotions was seen to be universal, while the cognitive aspect (ie: the attribution of the physiological response as a particular emotion) tended to be based on the situation.

Rosaldo (1984) argues that emotions are "bound up with the stories, myths and conventions of a culture which guide people on how to react in different circumstances" (Wetherell and Maybin 1996 p236). Therefore, we are not about shared universal emotions, but certain emotions that become part of a culture, and then part of the self.

Take for example anger. It can be seen that this is viewed in different ways around the world. In North America it is important to express anger spontaneously as it builds up inside, and then dies down after expression. While for the Utka Eskimos, they show no signs of anger, and when others display anger, they call it "childish" (Markus and Kitayama 1991).

However, for the Ilongot, anger is a property of males only, and involves a period of "sulking" before taking the head of a neighbouring tribesman. The word used is "liget" and means more than our understanding of anger in the West (Gergen 1991 quoted in Wetherell and Maybin 1996).

Emotions are bound in with cultural practices. The behaviour of the Ilongot is normal for them, because they practice head-hunting.

The issue revolves around whether the same basic emotions exist throughout the world, and it is the expression of these emotions that is socially constructed. Or it is socially constructed as to what is actually felt. Whatever, we must accept individual variations in the emotions within a single culture.

Parkinson (1996) explores the social causes of emotions by emphasising their interpersonal nature. Emotional significance is defined interpersonally (eg: jealousy is dependent on the existence of others), and also culturally (eg: self assertive emotions like anger are more common in individualistic societies).

In addition to supplying an evaluative frame of reference defining what there is to get emotional about, cultures and institutions also promote implicit and explicit expectations about interaction which may influence the ways in which emotional episodes are played out in the interpersonal arena (Parkinson 1996 p666).

This can be seen explicitly in that some advice columns in popular magazines specify the appropriate behaviour concerning relationships.

Emotions cannot be seen outside a social context because people are explicitly trained to appraise emotional relevant situations in institutionally appropriate ways. This is through the use of discourses, which evaluate the conduct as well as interpret it.

Emotions permeate the fabric of institutions and society; for example, superiors avoid relating and showing emotions to subordinates.

Furthermore, Parkinson (1996) sees emotions as having a communicative function. Chapman (1983) found that children's laughter in response to a cartoon was greater with an audience than alone. The children were attuned to the requirements of the audience.

If emotions are socially constructed, then what are the mechanisms involved. Great emphasis is placed on stories, dialogues and narratives during socialisation. In other words, the importance of what the child hears in the way others (predominantly adults) describe their experiences.

3.2.1 SUPPORT

Miller and Sperry (1987) carried out a longitudinal observation study of communication between 2-3 year old white girls and their mothers/care-givers in a particular part of Baltimore. The way the children came to express their emotions could be seen as related to the mothers' account of personal experience that the child had heard. These stories are part of the mothers' construction of self, and consequently became part of the child's.

Along side the stories, the mothers' behaviour was important in helping the girls learn the difference between justifiable and unjustifiable anger, and between being "sissy" (unable to defend self) and "spoiled" (responding angrily without reason). Similar results appear with black children in Baltimore.

But surely, this is just the learning of appropriate

"display rules". Wetherell and Maybin (1996) disagree - "the talk and interaction involved in learning these rules affect children's actual individual experience of feelings, and influence their emotional development in specific, culturally shaped ways" (p258).

3.3 RACISM

Miles (1989) says that racism creates a system of categories by which to include and exclude individuals. The social cognitive approach assumes the creation of these categories to be bias or distorted, "which can generally be traced back to universally shared shortcomings in human cognition" (Wetherell and Potter 1992 p36). But principally the process is an individual one - "the perceiver remains a lone individual, forming, apparently in isolation, their account of 'racial' traits on the basis of the actual similarities and differences of the individuals s/he encounters" (Wetherell and Potter 1992 p41).

The most obvious category is that of "race", though this has no biological basis. Lewontin (1987) suggests that only 7% of genetic variation exists between major "races", while 85% exists between individuals within the same "race".

Banton (1987) places the development of the concept of "race" with the Victorians' attempt to divide the world into a hierarchy.

Within the social constructionist explanation, racism is first and foremost a socially shared phenomena based on discourse.

Wetherell and Potter (1992) clarify that racism is not just words, but the use of words make the accepted history in which, for example, racial violence exists.

Much of the interest in prejudice and racism has focused on the stereotyping that forms the basis of such behaviour. Much of the traditional research sees stereotypes existing as a means to speed up the processing of social information. This is sometimes known as a "cognitive miser" model of thinking (Taylor 1981). Billig (1985) prefers to use the metaphor of an overworked bureaucrat struggling to keep up with filing the paperwork. The brain has a limited capacity, and thus categorisation will be inevitable. But, whatever, this process is individual.

The problem with this approach is that the victim of racism can become blamed for the racism. If they could behave differently, then the stereotypes (which contain a

"kernel of truth") would be different.

Social constructionism most importantly challenges the individual nature of the stereotyping process. The process is social in nature. Wetherell (1996) talks about "communal texts". Racism is constructed through discourse, which is based on accepted values. For example, in the 1987 Conservative Party, manifesto "race" appeared in the same section as "the fight against crime" (Condor 1988).

Wetherell and Potter (1992) looked at racist discourse in New Zealand, and particularly in reference to attitudes towards the Maoris. Using political speeches, they are able to show similar phrases that recur as "a clinching argument, or as a principle which should be beyond question" (p177). The issue is whether Maoris should have their own land, and the authors summarise the arguments into 10 statements; eg: "You cannot turn the clock backwards"; "Present generations cannot be blamed for the mistakes of past generations" (p177).

It is important that these statements are "taken for granted"; ie: not to be challenged. Discourse analysis will show that their assumption is racist, and the fact that a society takes them for granted shows the underlying racist assumptions within that society.

It is important to note that the racist discourse is not static. The basis in the past was "biological inferiority", but now this is less acceptable.

Dixon (1996) uses an example from "Spearhead" (a right wing publication advocating repatriation). The article is written as if to suggest that it is not motivated by just racial prejudice. "Repatriation is portrayed as a rational and necessary, if entirely regrettable, course of action, rather than an expression of irrational hatred" (p31).

Van Dijk (1987) using interviews with 183 Dutch racists found three strategies they use to make their views appear more acceptable:

- i) Credibility - to give the impression that they are "experts".
- ii) Positive self-presentation - to give good reasons for their prejudiced views.
- iii) Negative other-presentation - to give a bad picture of the prejudiced group.

Thus by defining such a context, unpleasant attitudes appear acceptable.

The discourse as always is more than just the speech an individual makes, but it is linked to the creation of

identity as the individual has internalized narratives throughout their lives. A simple example would be children echoing their parent's racist statements.

This is a long term process which is very much linked to an individual's social position. But it is never finished. Though the construction of identity (and racism) has a history (for example, in the UK, the slave trade), it is more than the "mere recovery of the past" (Hall 1990 quoted in Wetherell 1996b). "It is a continuing process rather than an already accomplished fact" (Wetherell 1996b p225).

The whole emphasis is on the discourse of racism - "the structure and organisation of people's accounts, sense-making, rationalizations and justifications" (Wetherell 1996b p228).

3.3.1 RACE AND PSYCHIATRY

Pilgrim and Rogers (1993) take the argument further by showing how mental illness and racism can become associated together. Thus accounting for the disproportionate number of people with Afro-Caribbean origins within the British mental health system.

Foucault (1965) has shown that madness is viewed as "other" (viewed as different to the rest of society). Barham and Hayward (1991) suggest that "Schizophrenia is more than an illness; it is something a person is or may become" (quoted in Pilgrim and Rogers 1993 p60).

Racism attempts to exclude certain groups because they are "other" ("alien"). There is a great similarity between the way mentally ill individuals can be controlled and excluded, and the way racism attempts to exclude immigrants.

But many black people are British born, and cannot be sent away. "Ideas about banishment to another country can be replaced by the mechanisms of exclusion and control afforded by the mental hospital, prison and physical treatments" (Pilgrim and Rogers 1993 p61). If not controlled, then represented as "other" in the discourse of mental health professionals. Therefore the mental health system is seen as part of a "repressive state apparatus" (Althusser 1971).

3.4 GENDER DEVELOPMENT

When trying to understand gender development, the physical body becomes the focus of the argument. This cannot be ignored, and in the vast majority of cases is

very similar between members of the same sex. Here it means similarity in terms of having the same physiology, rather than physical experience.

For social constructionists, biological differences between men and women are "not a physical given", but the "active interpretation of nature and society" (Wetherell 1996 p327).

The first and most important point is that gender (ie: knowing what is the "appropriate" behaviour of your biological sex) is not something automatic. For social constructionists identity is "actively constructed" from a choice of how to behave in different situations, what to look like, and what to wear among other things.

Wetherell (1996) focusing on the construction of masculinity, sees it as an "active project". She mentions five aspects to masculinity:

i) It is both personal and social - "social scripts about masculinity become part of the individual, defining what comes naturally or what feels right" (p321).

ii) It is connected to other social institutions - work is crucial in the definition of masculinity; traditionally hard, physical work as a sign of a "real man".

iii) Importantly, there is no single gender identity, but multiple - thus "masculinities". It is possible to distinguish working-class and middle-class masculinities, and black masculinities. Each of these influenced by living in a particular economic society (ie: capitalism in the West), and within a system of power (primarily patriarchy).

iv) Definitions of what is masculine must be seen in the context of a comparison with other men, and in comparison with femininity.

v) The importance of power relations in constructing masculinity - traditional masculinity has become associated with privilege.

Connell (1995) (quoted in Wetherell 1996) argues that power relations between men have developed four types of masculinity:

- a) hegemonic - dominant ideal type of masculinity;
- b) marginal - type which not persecuted nor ideal;
- c) subordinated - forms of masculinity which are persecuted by the ideal; eg: gay identity;
- d) complicit - identities that reject the ideal to some extent, but do not challenge it.

3.5 AGGRESSION

Defining aggression has always been difficult. One distinction, though, is between hostile and instrumental aggression. The latter being the use of aggression as a means to an end (eg: for self defence in an unprovoked attack). This is often not seen as aggression, because to call a behaviour "aggressive" is to give it a negative evaluation.

What is being said is that aggression is an "interpretative construct" rather than just a descriptive term (Mummendey 1996). For example, the police intervening at a demonstration will be perceived differently depending on which side the observer supports. Aggression is in the eye of the beholder.

Thus the search is for what factors influence the interpretation of a behaviour as aggressive. Mummendey (1996) lists three factors:

i) The specific norms of the situation, and whether the behaviour violates them.

ii) The attribution of cause of the behaviour as situational or dispositional. Rule and Ferguson (1984) talk about the "is-ought" discrepancy (the discrepancy between what actually happened and what should have happened). If an individual is badly insulted and provoked; their reaction with a punch will be perceived and labelled differently to an unprovoked punch.

Add to this, the assessment of responsibility, and research shows that people become angry when they feel they are victims of deliberate or unjustified acts.

iii) The position of the individual as actor, recipient or observer.

The use of aggression can be seen as a form of coercive power. Particularly whether a behaviour is legitimate or illegitimate will affect whether it is labelled as aggressive.

Tedeschi and Felson (1994) list the factors influencing whether individuals choose to use aggression as coercive power - expectancy in achieving goals with aggression; value attached to the goal; and the utilities and costs of behavioural alternatives. Thus the use of force to remove an invading army can be seen as legitimate, and not defined as aggression. Yet the behaviour of the invaders would be defined as aggression.

Wetherell and Potter (1989) take the example of police activity during protests and fighting at the 1981 rugby matches in New Zealand when South Africa were the

tourists. They interviewed white New Zealanders who were spectators. Using discourse analysis of the interviews, they showed how the police actions are "constructed" ("defined") as aggressive or not.

The interviews can be divided into groups based on the justification given for the police violence.

i) The police were antagonised by the protesters, and thus the police behaviour was not seen as violence. Any reports of such violence are downgraded by "minimization of the injury" (Semin and Manstead 1983).

ii) The police action is seen as a response to earlier violence, and is necessary in the situation.

iii) This group accepts the police were violent, but that it was necessary (justified) to keep law and order.

iv) The police behaviour is viewed as a consequence of the situation - eg: "tempers wore thin".

v) The police are seen as only doing their job.

Not all the speakers were direct supporters of the police, but were trying to make sense of the situation. The construction of behaviour as caused by "outside forces" is influenced by, and part of the language used, and consequently the definition of aggression. Aggression is usually seen as negative, and "caused" by the particular individual. Other behaviour (that which is not seen as aggressive) is "caused" by the situation, and usually seen as justified.

4. Evaluation of Social Constructionism

4.1 STRENGTHS

4.1.1 The individual is not separate from their society/culture

The strength of social constructionism is to emphasise the fact that an individual cannot be understood outside their particular situation. More than that, they are embedded in their culture.

Too often attempts to explain social behaviour have relied on an individual psychological explanation. Individuals are products of their culture and society (see section 2.1).

4.1.2 The methodology gives "rich" data

The use of qualitative data is relatively new in psychology. There are a number of different qualitative methods being used; the most important are the unstructured interview and discourse analysis (see sections 2.2.1 and 2.3.1).

These methods give the researcher "rich" data - information about the individual that is greater than just numbers.

a) They allow for a fuller description of the behaviour other than a simple numerical measurement.

b) They allow for the exploration of events and behaviour that benefit from an "insider's view" - to understand the meaning of the event or behaviour to the individual.

c) Usually they have better ecological validity compared to the lab experiment.

4.1.3 Combatting Sociobiology

Within psychology recently, sociobiological ideas have been particularly fashionable. The idea that social behaviour can be explained at a genetic or evolutionary level. Taking for example, differences in sexual behaviour between males and females, and in particular the use of prostitutes. The key here is that "differences between males and females can be explained in terms of differences in their genetic make-up" (Toates 1996 p62).

The reference to evolutionary explanations has been applied to many areas of behaviour (with degrees of success). Social constructionism provides an alternative, placing the emphasis on behaviour being learned within a particular culture.

Thus the social constructionist explanation of differences in sexual behaviour would be due to the culture. It would explain the fact that males visit prostitutes more, as a product of a particular society, and the "acceptable" or "normative" behaviour that is constructed for males.

4.1.4 Individuals are not passive in their development

A problem with approaches that try to explain behaviour in terms of learning, is that they usually see the individual as passive during development. The learning is done to the individual. This is particularly true for the Behaviourist approach.

Social constructionism allows for the fact that the individual is both active and passive in their development. During the process of constructing the self, primarily through language, the individual is involved.

4.2 WEAKNESSES

4.2.1 Methods are "not scientific"

The experimental method may have a number of weaknesses, but its strength is its objectivity. This is the basis of science.

Qualitative methods are too open to subjectivity, and influences that interfere with the data. Little attempt is made to control the possible variables and influences on the research situation.

For many psychologists, psychology is a science, and thus needs to use scientific methods. For them, the qualitative methods are too vague, and "unscientific".

Two key problems exist for qualitative methods:

i) The inability to separate the researcher from the situation being researched, and consequently the researcher's effect on the situation.

ii) The difficulty in comparing research because of a lack of standardisation.

4.2.2 Overemphasis on culture

If behaviour is embedded in culture, then we are faced with a problem of translation. To simply try to find equivalent words in another language would deprive the word of much of its meaning.

However, it must be accepted that there are some shared understandings between cultures. This becomes the crucial question about the universality of behaviour. How much behaviour is the same throughout the world? And how can we tell it is the same if translation is a problem?

4.2.3 Discursive psychology

There are a number of problems with discursive psychology:

a) The method of discourse analysis has been accused of being too subjective and unrigorous - simply interpreting the text as the individual feels. If two individuals have conflicting interpretations, how do we choose between them?

b) A concern about the move away from studying "inner processes", could be seen as a return to the approach of Behaviourism, which completely concentrated on observable behaviour.

Rejection of cognitive processes and structure leaves us with a "new social psychology that focuses on talk, not people, groups, cognition and so forth, as the basic social psychological unit" (Hogg and Vaughan 1995).

c) Concentrating too much on what is said, it could be that we ignore the "practical operations" (Moscovici 1994) performed on a message before its transmission. Communication is more than just the language, even if the language is studied for the hidden meanings.

4.2.4 Relativism

Following social constructionism to its logical conclusions, we are left with no fixed/absolute "truth". Every explanation is merely constructed, and is as equally valid as another explanation.

But how do we distinguish between different explanations? For example, racist ideology becomes as equally valid as a non-racist explanation - both are socially constructed.

While Wilkinson (1997), from a feminist viewpoint, is concerned that the rape victim's accusations would become one voice of many, rather than "true".

At the end of the day, there must be some way of deciding whether one explanation is "correct" ("more accurate") than another.

Bhaskar (1978) distinguishes between "transitive" and "intransitive objects of knowledge". The former is socially constructed, while the latter exists irrelevant to the culture.

Any adequate philosophy of science must find a way of grappling with this central paradox of science: that men in their social activity produce knowledge which is a social product much like any other, which is no more independent of its production and the men who produce it than motor cars, armchairs or books, which has its own craftsmen, technicians, publicists, standards and skills and which is no less subject to change than any other commodity. This is one side of 'knowledge'. The other is that knowledge is 'of' things which are not produced by men at all: the specific gravity of mercury, the process of electrolysis, the mechanism of light propagation. None of these 'objects of knowledge' depend upon human activity. If men ceased to exist sound would continue to travel and heavy bodies to fall to earth in exactly the same way.. (p21).

The argument revolves around what aspects of behaviour would be placed in the category of "intransitive objects".

GLOSSARY

A selection of the key terms in social constructionism.

- "AFFECT REGULATION"
 - the process by which memories are linked to attitudes as part of the construction of memories during recall.

- DISCOURSE
 - "all forms of spoken interaction, formal and informal, and written texts of all kinds" (Potter and Wetherell 1987 p7). (See also p14).

- DISCOURSE ANALYSIS
 - a research method that involves analysing a piece of discourse to find the underlying attitudes and motivations behind what is actually said.

- "FRAMING"
 - the process by which experience is divided up and stored in the memory.

- "NARRATIVE"
 - the way we describe our selves, our history and behaviour is seen as a "story". It is a construction for a particular situation, and in order to make a certain point. These "stories" join together to form narrative.

- "POSITIONING"
 - "identity positions" are similar to roles; they are parts that people play during interaction.

FURTHER READING

The key text which introduces the main principles is Potter and Wetherell (1987). This is quite technical. It gives full details of the social construction explanation of the self. A full overview of the place of social constructionism in the history of ideas, and the many variations within social constructionism is found in Burr (1995). A very technical discussion of issues is Ibanez and Iniquez (1997).

More readable and introductory examinations of the issues and principles of social constructionism are Wetherell and Maybin (1996), and Wetherell (1996b).

The principles of discursive psychology are described in introductory form in Potter (1996).

Banister et al (1994) is an excellent introduction, and handbook with examples, to qualitative methods.

The social constructionist explanation of racism is outlined in Wetherell (1996b), and explored in detail in Wetherell and Potter (1992). The latter is quite technical in its discourse analysis.

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